

Oral health during pregnancy

What to expect when expecting

You have so much to think about during pregnancy, but don't overlook your oral health, which can be affected by the hormonal changes you will experience during this time.

For example, women are more likely to develop gingivitis during pregnancy. Gingivitis is an infection of the gingivae (gums) that can cause swelling and tenderness. Your gums also may bleed a little when you brush or floss. Left untreated, gingivitis can affect the supporting tissues that hold your teeth in place. Your dentist may recommend more frequent cleanings to prevent gingivitis.

Sometimes lumps appear along the gum line and between teeth. These swellings are harmless, but they bleed easily and are characterized by a red, raw-looking mulberrylike surface. Although these growths are called "pregnancy tumors," they are not cancerous. They usually go away on their own after pregnancy, but they can be removed under a local anesthetic if they bother you.

DENTAL CARE

You should continue to see your dentist during pregnancy for oral examinations and professional teeth cleaning. Tell your dentist that you are pregnant and about any changes you have noticed in your oral health.

Also, be sure to let your dentist know about any medications or supplements you are taking. Your dentist may need to use or prescribe medication as part of your treatment. Some medications are considered safe for limited use during pregnancy and some should not be used at all. For example, if you develop an infection, your dentist might prescribe penicillin or amoxicillin. However, pregnant women should not be treated with tetracycline because it can stain the fetus' developing teeth. Once they erupt, the teeth may look gray or brown permanently as a result of these stains. Your dentist or physician can talk with you about medications that are safe to use during pregnancy.

Although radiography (x-rays) often can be

delayed until after your baby is born, your dentist may need to obtain a radiograph as part of your dental treatment. To minimize your exposure and that of the fetus to x-rays, your dentist will cover your abdomen with a protective apron and place a thyroid collar over your throat.

Talk with your dentist or physician about any concerns you may have about your treatment.

Good daily care is key to your oral health. To help prevent caries (tooth decay) and gum disease, brush your teeth thoroughly twice a day with fluoride toothpaste to remove plaque. Be sure to clean between your teeth daily with floss or another interdental cleaner. Ask your dentist or hygienist to show you how to brush and floss correctly. When choosing oral care products, look for those that display the American Dental Association's Seal of Acceptance, your assurance that they have met ADA criteria for safety and effectiveness.



DIET

Frequent snacking may increase your risk of developing tooth decay, which is caused by plaque, a sticky film of bacteria that forms constantly on teeth. The bacteria convert sugar and starch that remain in the mouth after eating to acid that attacks tooth enamel. The longer the sugars remain in your mouth, the longer the acids attack. After repeated attacks, tooth decay can result.

ORAL HEALTH AND OVERALL HEALTH

Your oral health is an important part of your overall health, and untreated dental disease can be harmful to you and your baby. Be sure to include your oral health in your daily self-care routine and keep your dentist informed of any changes in your oral health during pregnancy. ■

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